

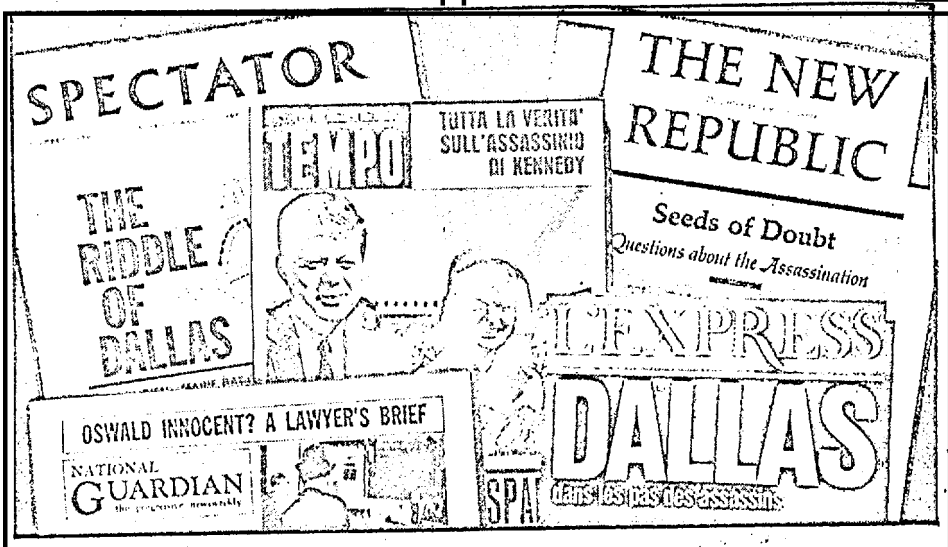

Some at home, many more abroad, raise skeptical questions

JFK's Murder: Sowers of Doubt

Almost from the first, the crime of the century seemed hardly a mystery. A bare 90 minutes after John F. Kennedy was shot down in Dallas last Nov. 22, Lee Harvey Oswald was under arrest. Before the night was out, he was formally charged with the assassination. Within two days, he had been tried in the press, convicted in the public mind, and executed by small-time strip-joint impresario Jack Ruby. It was open and shut—or was it?

A nagging chorus of doubts was abroad on both sides of the Atlantic last week, the dissenting opinions of a world not yet wholly convinced that Oswald—and Oswald alone—killed the President.

Some of the alternate views were plainly farfetched: it was a plot by the Syndicate, or the CIA, or labor racketeers, or a ring of Dallas cops. Yet such tales are only the most imaginative making the rounds in the absence of a final, authoritative account of the case. Some of the doubts are political, the speculations of those given to a conspiratorial view of events. The far right has been relatively quiet, content to rest its case on Oswald's private "Marxism" and his two-year defection to Russia as ipso facto evidence of a Communist plot. The voice of the left has been lustier. Thrown onto the defensive by Oswald's *politique*, it has applied reverse English to the conspiracy theory: the suspect was really an FBI hireling, a crypto-rightist—if he was involved at all.

But even in the middle, some Americans—and many Europeans—simply find it hard to believe that so great a crime should be so random, so absurd, so devoid of motivation and mystery as it seems in the official view.

It was precisely to settle any doubts that Lyndon B. Johnson named his extraordinary commission of inquiry with Chief Justice Earl Warren as chairman. But the commission is still taking testimony in private, its verdict still two or three months away. Until that verdict is in, the public case against Oswald remains a collage of statements and misstatements by Dallas authorities in the first chaotic days after the assassination, patched up piecemeal by unattributed leaks from Washington and amateur sleuthing by newsmen.

Grab Bag: That mixed bag has been a grab bag for the doubters, a source of loopholes and contradictions for anyone with the time and the will to subject the press accounts to a close, selective exegesis. Conspiracy theories are common currency abroad. And an ex-Communist American in Paris, Thomas Buchanan, seems destined for the widest circulation with one of the most fanciful reconstructions of all; Oswald was little more than an errand boy and, finally, the fall guy in a plot involving several Dallas policemen. His account—serialized in the Paris tabloid L'Express—has been snapped up by book publishers throughout Europe.

And Oswald is not without defenders in the U.S. His most ardent advocate has been Mark Lane, a New York lawyer who made his name as a controversialist in a lonely, losing campaign for conflict-of-interest legislation as a one-term state assemblyman. He had already argued Oswald's innocence in a lengthy "brief" published in the leftist National Guardian when the suspect's mother, Marguerite, named him defense counsel to her late son. Since, he has carried his cause onto the college lecture circuit; the Warren commission itself granted him a hearing. And critiques by other skeptics have appeared in several liberal journals, among them The New Republic, The Nation, and Commentary.

Questions: The critiques are a mixed lot, some based entirely on newspaper accounts, others—including Lane's—fleshed out by on-scene inquiries in Dallas. Yet they share an instinct for the soft spots in the case thus far made public. With official sources under orders to button up until the Warren report is in, the doubters have raised some puzzling questions for which only incomplete answers are now available. The key points:

Did all the shots fired at the Kennedy motorcade really come from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald worked?

The doubters argue that one, at least, came from a railroad overpass or a grassy knoll dead ahead of the motorcade—not from the Depository to the rear. Several witnesses thought that was the angle of fire, and so did the cop who first broadcast a report of the assassination. Moreover, doctors at first described a wound just below the President's Adam's apple as an entry wound—an impossible shot from the rear. Two newsmen reported seeing a bullet hole in the windshield of the Kennedy limousine. And some press tallies of the number of recovered bullets suggest that four or five shots were fired—not three as officially indicated.

Investigators simply dismiss ear-witness accounts of where the shots came from; besides, no known witnesses saw a rifle on the knoll or the overpass, while some reported seeing a gun barrel in the Depository window. They also discount the entry-wound diagnosis as the fleeting impression of doctors before they opened the President's throat in the attempt to save his life. According to subsequent leaks, an autopsy at Bethesda, Md., showed the President had been hit twice from behind—once in the back of the shoulder, once in the back of the head. A third shot hit Texas Gov. John Connally in the back.

Authorities remain convinced that no other shots were fired. By their count, the bullet that hit Connally lodged in his leg. Another fell from Mr. Kennedy's body when he was placed on a stretcher—thus giving rise to reports of a fourth bullet. The third bullet fragmented: one chunk exited through Mr. Kennedy's throat, and another scarred the inner layer of glass in the three-ply middle windshield. There wasn't so much as a bump on the outer layer, said one commission insider—and there was no bullet hole.

Does the time element alibi Oswald?

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